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The Perspective of History

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The Perspective of History

The perspective of history can be sobering, even humbling. Not so recently, two men from the same faith tradition but different perspectives joined in a debate about whether and how a man whom they both acknowledged as a prophet could have seen what he said he saw and be who he claimed to be. As it unfolded, their discussion touched upon many aspects of what it means to have faith in such a person and in his revelations. The role of reason in relation to revelation, the relevance of history to faith, and the connection of language to perception were all explored. The power of poetry and other idioms of popular culture in establishing the credibility of one's chosen narrative were on display. Their debate was not an isolated event; it was just one of many in an ongoing phenomenon of cultural and spiritual contestation and negotiation. And although the two men in this case lived eleven hundred years ago, that same process of debate that they engaged in is still under way in our own times and is very much a part of our cultural climate today.

The two men were the famous Isma'ili missionary Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. ca. 933) and the even more celebrated Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (d. 925), the physician and philosopher known to medieval Europe as "Rhazes." These two—a Shi'ite and a (nominal) Sunnī, respectively—were towering figures of premodern Islamic thought, and the record of their famous argument has now been published in the Maxwell Institute's Middle Eastern Texts Initiative as *The Proofs of Prophecy*, translated by the eminent and prolific Cambridge scholar Tarif Khalidi.

This debate brings us into immediate contact with some of the most intellectually exciting topics of medieval Islamic culture. Abū Ḥātim marshals evidence for his position from the Qur'an, the hadith (sayings of Muhammad), and pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, as well as from the Jewish and Christian scriptures. The freshness and vividness of the debate lose little of their excitement for a

modern reader interested not merely in medieval Islamic but Christian thought as well.

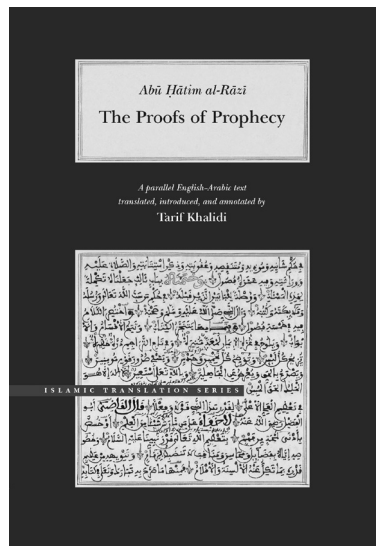
By the time *Proofs of Prophecy* was composed, Islam was already older than the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is now. And yet, viewed in historical terms, Islam was still in its adolescence. Its sister faith, Christianity, was approaching its first millennium, and Judaism was much older still. As Latter-day Saints, we sometimes forget how new on the scene we really are. We do not tend to view the Church as still

struggling to work out the meanings and implications of its message the way Islam was in its third century. Professor Khalidi writes of this period in Islam's development as the "Age of the Great Debate," during which theological questions between Muslims and Christians, and among Muslims themselves, were being argued with greater and greater sophistication.

If Mormonism today seems to have a greater sense of theological self-confidence than Islam did by this point, that is hardly to say that all questions have been

settled and there are no more to be raised. It is true that the Latter-day Saints have been strengthened as a people by their commitment to the principle of continuing revelation and prophetic guidance, whereas Islam came to view Muhammad as the last of the prophets and the end of direct revelation by God to the earth. Nevertheless, the historical experience of Islam may not be wholly irrelevant either. After all, the story of the Restoration is now being told and retold by Mormons and non-Mormons alike. It is being negotiated and renegotiated as never before, across the country and across the world, in forums large, small, and too numerous to quantify. Where will this conversation—which Mormons can join but no longer control—lead?

The least that can be said is that the Church is still young. President Boyd K. Packer recently spoke from this perspective when he said that the LDS youth of this generation should plan to raise children, grandchildren, and perhaps even great-grandchildren of their own.¹ Who is to say what



the Church might look like in another generation, or three, or more? If we could view ourselves today from the perspective of half a millennium of growth and effort and cultural evolution, how might we characterize our particular “Mormon moment” in history? Perhaps what we are witnessing is not so much the culmination of our history as a people but an adolescent coming-out event. And perhaps we may yet find something instructive in the experience of another prophetic

tradition with a fantastic story to tell the world—a tradition that was once as young as we are now.

The Proofs of Prophecy is available for purchase through the University of Chicago Press and www.byubookstore.com. ♦

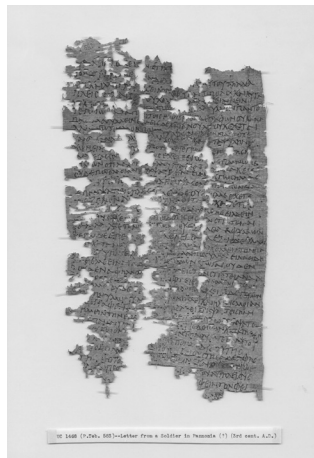
By D. Morgan Davis

Director, Middle Eastern Texts Initiative

1. Boyd K. Packer, “Counsel to Youth,” *Ensign*, November 2011, 16–19.

BYU Hosts Papyrology Summer Institute

This past summer Brigham Young University, in collaboration with the American Society of Papyrologists (ASP), hosted the Seventh International Papyrology Summer Institute (June 20–July 29, 2011). The ASP began hosting these institutes in 2003 and plans to continue through 2015. The objective of the seminar is to teach participants how to read and use papyri and to provide them with the kind of practical experience that would enable them to make productive use of papyrus texts in their own research. Fields of study include Classics, ancient history, Egyptology, archaeology, ancient religions, and biblical studies.



Courtesy of the Center for the Tebtunis Papyri, University of California, Berkeley

During this six-week seminar, nine doctoral students and one junior faculty member from universities in the United States, Canada, Egypt, Austria, Belgium, and Germany gathered at BYU to hone their skills in deciphering Greek papyri. The on-site coordinators of the seminar from BYU were Roger Macfarlane, Lincoln Blumell, Thomas Wayment, and Stephen Bay. John Gee, the William “Bill” Gay Research Professor of Egyptology at the Maxwell Institute, taught classes during the seminar. Additionally, a number of world-renowned papyrologists attended

and helped run the seminar. These included Peter van Minnen (University of Cincinnati), Roger Bagnall (New York University), Josh Sosin (Duke University), Nikos Litinas (University of Crete), Todd Hickey (University of California, Berkeley), Maryline Parca (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), Klaas Worp (University of Amsterdam), Rodney Ast (Heidelberg University), and Arthur Verhoogt (University of Michigan).

This most recent seminar’s theme was Roman Egypt. Since BYU’s papyrological holdings are rather small, UC Berkeley generously loaned BYU a number of papyri from its Tebtunis collection. All the documents from the Berkeley collection were written in Greek and dated between the first and third centuries AD. As a result of the work done on these texts during the seminar, participants in the seminar will publish these papyri in full editions with translations over the course of the next few years. Among the various texts edited were a couple of ancient letters, including one from a soldier serving in Pannonia and sent back to his family in Egypt, two land registers, a few contracts, some first-century court proceedings, and some land leases.

BYU’s reputation in the field of ancient texts and manuscripts has been greatly bolstered. BYU now joins an elite group of universities that have previously held this seminar (Yale, Berkeley, Cincinnati, Columbia, Stanford, and Michigan). Funds to host the seminar were provided by Religious Education at BYU as well as by the College of Humanities and the Maxwell Institute. ♦

By Lincoln Blumell

Assistant Professor, Ancient Scripture, BYU